

# A common-to-come

## Fictionalising the common at the crossover of theatre and history

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper deals with the complicities between history and theatre, starting from the deleuzian concept of people to-come (*peuple à venir*) and from the images of the Peter Brook's film *Marat/Sade*. Both concept and image will contribute to understand the meaning of fictionalizing the common and from which ontological, aesthetic and political proposals we can face the issue. The tension between aesthetics and politics will constantly appear through the text, and it will help us to think about a concept of "common" that does not accommodate neither by a representational thought nor an account of the historic understood as the process of major revolutions. Both proposals will complete each other and will help me to think about the meaning of a common world-to-come.

**KEYWORDS:** people-to-come, common, history, theatre, ontology, Peter Brook, Gilles Deleuze

### 1 On wild poems and bedtime stories

Let's escape, for a short while, to the land of night-time tales and bedtime stories, the kind of yarns that are spun around the fire or over spilt beer on a pub table. The dreams that inhabit the calm before the battle, the fictional characters who feed our history, but not the history we find in school textbooks, rather that which rolls on like an endless path to weave our way down. All the stories we tell each other, just to keep ourselves going. Actually, tales do not live in the past nor in the present, and they go beyond the confines of books - they live on in our bodies and help shape our sensibilities. They are, in some way, the poetic foundation that brings to life our way of relating and being with others. This poetic background, which disrupts and transforms our common life, sketches the political experience that we have of it, shifting the coordinates we use to place ourselves in the world.

Talking about the fictions of the common is related to all of this..It is about asking ourselves what joins and shapes us, together, transforming the common landscape in which we live to try and see ourselves differently. For instance, from Schiller to Brecht, some have seen the pedagogic capacity of theatre to change and educate, aesthetically, both the individual and society. Many have looked upon it with both trust and fear, because it could be the tool for turning us into better men, or better slaves. In any case, theatre was thrown down the challenge of creating the new man; and at the same time, historical events have often been lived, by their agents, as embodiments of past revolutions, where the same events would keep repeating themselves, over and over.

Consequently, I wonder to what extent theatre and history are related. Is theatre not but an aesthetic source of reflection? And is history not but the provider of examples of political events? Together, do they form a field teeming with diverse interests, the two sides divided by an ever-blurry line? I propose that we think about the particular historical terrain of our lives, this basis for our cultural, economic and social standpoints, like a stage on which we create our own stories, starting with a collection of stories that form the shared background of our experience. So, as Jacques Rancière says, “writing history and writing stories come under the same regime of truth” (RANCIÈRE, 2013: 35). Fiction needs our help to think about the real in a different way: like something which is not given to you on a plate, but which has the potential to be produced and created. As a result, history can be thought of as a theatre, where the performer-spectators are producing new meaning from political and aesthetic experiences, shared and recounted. In the same way, when we think about theatre as a producer of space and time, which is able to bring bodies together, it appears to us like a birthplace for the political.

If we consider history and aesthetics in such a way, Gilles Deleuze’s concept of “people-to-come” is highly pertinent. This concept expresses the aesthetic-political problematic that, conceived by Hölderlin and powerfully revived by Nietzsche, poses the problem of how to reconcile a differing expression of what is singular with its break in historical common sense. This is within a shared plane of life, where one accepts a series of values and collective norms that codify ways of living. Facing this, the people- to-come can be found, having dumped their father’s corpse because it is too heavy to drag around, where the brotherhood makes peace and walks forward, hand-in-hand, building a future far removed from morals of salvation and any imposition of common sense.

A good illustration of this kind of problem can be seen in Peter Brook’s film *Marat/Sade*, first screened in 1967. The film is based on the meta-theatrical piece of the same name, directed by Brook along with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and based on an original piece by Peter Weiss. The film is set in 1808, at Charenton Asylum, where Sade was interned and where, sometimes, he was given the chance to write theatre pieces and perform them with the other patients. So, like Russian dolls, the film plays with three different times: the time of the events narrated on stage (Marat’s murder by Corday, a Girondin), the representational time (the Napoleonic, counter-revolutionary period), and the spectator’s own time. Even so, this playing with the representation is in itself complex. Since it consists of the filming of a theatrical piece, the image of the representation can be split into several layers: the first layer concerns the film, the second concerns the representation in Charenton, and the third is the story as told by the patients.

With a staging inspired by Grotowski’s notion of ‘poor theatre’, Brook’s film invites a reflection which, some years later, Joaquim Jordà will bring to his documentary film *Monos como Becky* (“*Monkeys like Becky*”): to what extent can aesthetic experience be transformative, and how can art be therapeutic? Is there a clear dividing line between spectators and actors? How can theatre and history cross over? Can the common be brought about by means of performance and poetic production?

Finally, I will discuss the image of the final scene to help us think and rethink the text. Here, the entire representation crumbles to pieces due to a final setback, that opens up the story to an unfinished, perhaps even revolutionary ending, where aesthetics and politics appear together.

## 2 Theatre and history

The connection between history and theatre invites us to reflect on collective production and being together. To what extent can we say historical and political events take place due to the changes in the sensible that follow an aesthetic experience?:

Marx's theory of historical repetition, as it appears notably in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, turns on the following principle, which does not seem to have been sufficiently understood by historians: historical repetition is neither a matter of analogy nor a concept produced by the reflection of historians, but above all a condition of historical action itself.

Harold Rosenberg illuminates this point in some fine pages: historical actors or agents can create only on condition that they identify themselves with figures from the past. In this sense, history is theatre (DELEUZE, 2004: 114)

If the agents of history can only create by identifying themselves with figures from the past, then history is a theatre. What Deleuze proposes is a way of understanding his concept of repetition, which is related with a conception of temporality, because what is repeated, is repeated differently every time it comes around. As in theatre, there is no performance identical to the one before, because each one embodies the new as a marker of difference. In the same way, the revolutionary event, which breaks with history, brings to the present a time past, without therefore representing it. Such collective transformations, which are capable of breaking with the lineal passing of history, are a production of difference insomuch that the time in which they take place does not conform to any pattern. It is a vacuous time, because it is an opening in itself, albeit teeming with a myriad of different senses and thus capable of proliferating the manifold amid the tyranny of the imposed sense. Consequently, repetition is not representation, but rather repetition is a connection with (the event's) time-to-come, and, to that end, every event dances along with other events, i.e. those which also managed to wrestle time free from its shackles. Because of this, fictionalising the common is not about invoking an already-formed common, embodied in a historical subject or a bias of the people - it is about reproducing it, creating the time-space conditions that bring it to life.

But let us go back to our bedtime stories, which summon warriors around the world. All revolutionary processes are based on tales, inspired by their characters. If we stop differentiating between historical characters and those from stories, between Robespierre and Robin Hood, Pirate Jenny and V for Vendetta, we see to what extent the identifications with these characters can produce similar, real effects(1). Let us consider *Marat/Sade*. The patients act out historical facts not so far removed from their own chronological time, embodying characters who were the agents in the French Revolution. The main characters (Corday or Marat) are not as important to me as all the other characters who embody the people. Anonymous faces, so anonymous that their corresponding bodies are left long-forgotten in the dark corners of Charenton, stigmatised as insane or maniacs, kept away from anyone who might be considered a citizen. Such as the French people who descended on the Bastille to demand their rights. In short, their cause is futile, because there is no place for them in the political and social life of the city. Both this group, i.e. the people in arms who demand their political rights, and the others, the lunatics excluded from the world, come together on stage and, with some at the Bastille and others inside Charenton's toilets, they cry out for their cause:

*We've got nothing / Always had nothing / Nothing but holes / Millions of them / Living in holes / dying in holes / holes in our bellies / and holes in our clothes*

*Marat! We are poor! / and the poor stay poor / Marat don't make us wait anymore / We want our rights, and we don't care how! / We want our revolution... right now! :*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azTAMrLYF4s&list=PLb8uQwIRu97M0ZE6OjNvsjl3a6\\_PJsSm&index=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azTAMrLYF4s&list=PLb8uQwIRu97M0ZE6OjNvsjl3a6_PJsSm&index=5)  
(BROOK, 1967).

The patients, inspired by the people of the French Revolution, do not perform a simple representation of the events, but rather they break with the historical timeline, and so they can bring a common to life. The time-to-come, which does not refer to the future - because the people never come from the future, and there is no point sitting around waiting for them - but rather the becoming, is the time where this collectivity takes shape. Therefore, the bodies of the patients manage to express a poetic truth that slips through the manager's censorship and, at the same time, this truth takes on a new political sense, due to their being together, a state from which, until that point, they had been excluded:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8YXaYzMMBE&index=6&list=PLb8uQwIRu97M0ZEt6OjNvsjl3a6\\_PJsSm](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8YXaYzMMBE&index=6&list=PLb8uQwIRu97M0ZEt6OjNvsjl3a6_PJsSm) (BROOK, 1967).

In this sense, theatre can work as a space for revealing truths with political consequences, both for those who act and for those who watch on, and not as a space for empty appearances and representations.

### 3. A people-to-come...

*Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades,  
With the life-long love of comrades.*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of grass*

In Deleuze's thinking, the concept of people-to-come (*peuple à-venir*) combines the interesting aesthetic and political problematic with the notion of the event (NÚÑEZ, 2010). In a beautiful chapter from *Critique et Clinique*, dedicated to Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, Deleuze takes us through Anglo-American literature, relating it with philosophical pragmatism and the beginnings of the Soviet Revolution. The latter, like the American Revolution, also looked for that new man who, already released from the figure of the political father, would herald the age of the comrades. For Deleuze, the American example, thanks to Melville, Whitman or Kerouac, can be seen in the patchwork of nationalities and federate states that Anglo-American literature comprises. This is a literature that builds upon the foundations of the down-and-outs, the beatniks and the pirates, but also on the fragile *Bartleby*. In this way, the fragmented voice of North-American poetry, and its capacity to talk in many different voices, is related to the concept of the people-to-come, in the sense that it announces a new universalism. A universalism that is not about the European model of fatherly parentage, but about the free links between friends and comrades: "To liberate man from the father function, to give birth to the new man or the man without particularities, to reunite the original and humanity by constituting a society of brothers as a new universality" (DELEUZE, 1997: 84).

This chapter begins by discussing, in these terms, the need to forge a new universality, and it concludes by announcing the people-to-come, thus giving us some clues as to what it means to fictionalise the common. As has been said, the common cannot be represented, but it can be brought about poetically and politically, transforming the human experience and generating new patterns of sensibility. The people to-come is the missing people, in the sense that they elude those structures that demand a certain mode of appearance, yet also challenging those who try and sweep them aside. Therefore, the concept of people does not call for a previously given people, but rather a people that are never where

they are required to be, but even so they still aspire to a new universality, no longer provided by a tangle of morals, but by creative and joyful assertion. It is about a very special union, which emerges from this divergence.

On the other hand, these people are related to the Deleuzian manner of conceptualising temporality, linked with the concept of the event. The event is a non-chronological temporality that, as a result, does not merely *occur*, but creates. The event time is a creating time, the making explicit of an imminent becoming, which is not lineal (i.e. like a present that is superimposed on the past), and nor is it a future time to aim for, depending on an ideal project. Events burst into history and generate an opening of multiple senses. This way, an entrance to a multidimensional reality is opened: not all that is real is already underway, but the world also possesses constituent virtualities that could be stimulated in the here and now. So, in what sense could be the people-to-come be the expression of these constituent virtualities(2)?

I realise that the advantage of thinking of the virtual as something real, and not as something possible, supports the idea of a world that already contains its own potential for transformation, already inhabiting our present. The only thing required of us is that we learn how to locate this potential, and how to bring it about, in our factual present, by means of a creative act. It has always been like this: the creative act is a factory of new worlds and multitudes, where what matters is that this potential is given the space and time *to take shape* and become *material*. Consequently, this work consists of a two-headed ontology, aesthetic and political, because the creation of new ways of living, which coexist and resist in the present, also requires the creation of times and spaces which transform the aesthetic sensibility.

Going back to *Marat/Sade*, the final scene could help us tease out the meaning of this paragraph. At this point, it is worth considering Brook's film alongside *Monos como Becky* by Joaquim Jordà, because both films reflect on the consequences that can stem from roleplay, from staging impossible situations, reviving supposedly dead characters or taking on painful discourses. In this sense, a patient in Jordà's film, playing Egas Moniz, has something in common with one of Brook's lunatics playing a French revolutionary. In both cases, there is a disconnection in the distribution of the sensible that, by playing with social and political positions and changing their places, leads to an aesthetic transformation(3). There would seem to be a missing link, a miscommunication, like Chinese whispers between the mad people from Charenton and the revolutionaries from 1789. The information they receive is incomplete, they cannot quite hear it all; there is a misunderstanding that changes something between them, but they retain something in common, like a gesture or a sympathy. Both are calling on this creative and affirmative temporality of the event, which causes the people's uprising in the toilets of Charenton.

In the closing scene of the film, this opening is made clear:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKI7BJXTkxM&index=19&list=PLC6FB7E8BFBFA3C3A> (BROOK, 1967)

#### 4 The revolutionary-becoming of the people

The question of the future of the revolution is a bad question because, in so far as it is asked, there are so many people who do not become revolutionaries, and this is exactly why it is done, to impede the question of the revolutionary-becoming of people, at every level, in every place. (DELEUZE y PARNET, 2002: 110)

Many have already deemed political philosophy as that which should comment on major revolutionary processes, understanding them like changes in alchemy, ready to leave behind the old, bringing the new with them, in a new age of joy and prosperity. However, not many have written about these transformation processes which generate subjectivities, not only being resistant to hegemonical times and spaces, but also able to create new ways of living. Emancipation, following this shift in perspective, is no longer understood as an era-defining leap over a chasm, but as a group of connected transformations that generate processes of subjectivation and changes in the key points of our sensibility, translated into different ways of living and new ways of relating to one other. Because of this, the people-to-come are not the future people, but the becoming people, for whom we have to plant seeds in much the same way a poet does: launching verses into the coming times, feeding this transformation that writes and is inscribed into the materiality of the world.

To achieve this, again, thinking about the real as opposed to the possible is about singling out and empowering the spaces and times that are able to connect with a revolutionary becoming. It is no longer about hoping that revolution will come with future horizons, but about setting up the conditions so that we ourselves can bring about the horizon we so desire. To do this, regaining trust in the virtual forces of the present is just as important as helping them breathe: wherever we come across a veering from the normal path we must empower it, organise encounters, always be attentive and work to strengthen the timelessness of the time-to-come. It is not the future of the revolution that must be planned, because from that point of view revolutions are always betrayed let down. What is much more interesting are the revolutionary possibilities which are already becoming possible, the effective revolutionary-becomings of the people.

Regarding this issue, not only Brook's films, but also the fiction-documentaries by Joaquim Jordà or Basilio Martín Patino can shed light on other ways of thinking about these fiction-related processes. The interesting thing is that they set about including fiction as another constituent part of reality, in itself equally effective when it comes to producing the revolutionary-becomings as discussed by Deleuze. In fact, this is a proposal that does not consider history as the process of major revolutions, led by constituted political subjects (determined, in this case, by their strict social and economic position within the system of production). If, as Rancière states, "the real must be fictionalised in order to be thought" (RANCIÈRE, 2013: 61) - to which I would add that it should also be experienced - then creating a sensibility for the common, to equip ourselves with the type of images and words that could help us produce those spaces and times to-come, is a task which arises as a result of this article.

In Charenton, when the patients come out of their cells and get together in the toilets to act out the revolutionary process, together they create, in the time and space confines of the theatre, a real possibility that allows them to come together. Theatre enables them to create a kind of busy emptiness, which gives way to the possible emergence of a myriad of senses and ideas. In order to make this revelation in thought possible, in order to let the revolutionary idea break out, first there must be an opening to create the right conditions for new critical thinking. In this open space is where the revolt proliferates, the violence of a new thought appears at the limits of the language, where it goes beyond representation, and writing is lived and experienced. That is when the body emerges. This emptiness is generated by theatre, where the word is embodied and lived, and the space is filled with bodies, and, as Spinoza once said, we do not even know what a body is capable of.

As a consequence of all this, and now that the politico-aesthetic conditions of a people-to-come have been set out, it is worth thinking about the connections in the space between the bodies which bring theatre to life. The challenges

and fictions that remain open from now on are related to what happens between these bodies in their processes of transformation. In short, if bodies embody time and space, as well as being responsible for producing it, then bodies are what must take precedence from now on. Bodies, inasmuch that they possess the transformative potential of life, pose new challenges in terms of rethinking the political and aesthetic problems that concern us. We see, thus, the way bodies push the limits to a place where poetic expression can emerge and a truth is uttered, one which resuscitates all those who were dead in life.



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### Filmography

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